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One of the surest ways to lose all hope that Congress will ever solve the nation's toughest problems is to watch the annual debate over the federal budget, which took place in the House last week.

Remember, this comes at a time when budget deficits (about \$1 trillion a year) and the national debt (\$15.6 trillion, counting what the nation owes itself for programs such as Social Security) constitute an increasingly urgent national crisis.

What did the House do? Nothing. Democrats offered a budget that got no Republican votes. Republicans offered a budget that got no Democratic votes, but passed because the GOP controls the House. It will go nowhere in the Democratic Senate, which has no plans to take up a budget this year anyway.

If that's what passes for Congress doing its job, voters will be justified in thinking they need a new Congress. But voters are just as feckless and irresponsible. They keep electing politicians who promise not to raise their taxes or cut their benefits, and they tell pollsters they don't want their representatives to compromise. What do they expect?

There aren't many heroes in this soul-destroying process, but we found a tiny band of 38 — the 22 Democrats and 16 Republicans who voted for a bipartisan alternative budget based on the proposal from President Obama's fiscal commission in 2010. The budget proposed by Reps. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., and Steven LaTourette, R-Ohio, backed a combination of the tax increases most Republicans won't vote for and the cuts in entitlement programs such as Social Security that most Democrats won't support.

This, or something very much like it, is where every non-partisan budget expert and every realistic politician in Washington knows Congress will have to go to solve the budget problem. Entitlements in their current form are unsustainably expensive, and tax cuts have left revenues at historic lows, inadequate to pay for the government services Americans demand.

Cooper and LaTourette both say about 100 members said they'd be with them, but then conservative and liberal organizations — groups LaTourette colorfully called "bloodsuckers" — began an unusually aggressive effort to pressure Republicans and Democrats to vote no. By the final 382-38 vote, two-thirds of Cooper's and LaTourette's allies had slunk away. Some came around afterward to sheepishly apologize. One member, says Cooper, told him that if he hadn't voted no, his favorite lobbyist would have been fired. In case you wondered how budget policy gets made in Washington, there's a clue.

Fixing the budget problem will only get harder, especially at the end of this year, when the debt limit will run out again, the Bush tax cuts are set to expire and punishing spending cuts will go into effect. |

The belief that this fall's election will clarify voter sentiment and make the job easier is naive. Voters almost always send mixed messages. The job of representatives in a democracy is to

govern, which requires compromise. The fact that only 38 members of the House did so is shameful.

The Brave 38

•16 Republicans:

Charles Bass, N.H.
Ann Marie Buerkle, N.Y.
Charlie Dent, Pa.
Robert Dold, Ill.
Chris Gibson, N.Y.
Timothy Johnson, Ill.
Steve LaTourette, Ohio
Cynthia Lummis, Wyo.
Patrick Meehan, Pa.
Tom Petri, Wis.
Todd Platts, Pa.
Tom Reed, N.Y.
John Shimkus, Ill.
Mike Simpson, Idaho
Frank Wolf, Va.
Don Young, Alaska

•22 Democrats:

Robert Andrews, N.J.
Dan Boren, Okla.
Leonard Boswell, Iowa
John Carney, Del.
James Clyburn, S.C.
Jim Cooper, Tenn.
Jim Costa, Calif.
Henry Cuellar, Texas
Chaka Fattah, Pa.
Jim Himes, Conn.
Ron Kind, Wis.
Rick Larsen, Wash.
Dan Lipinski, Ill.
Ed Perlmutter, Colo.
Collin Peterson, Minn.
Jared Polis, Colo.
Mike Quigley, Ill.
Kurt Schrader, Ore.
Allyson Schwartz, Pa.
Heath Shuler, N.C.

Pete Visclosky, Ind.
Mel Watt, N.C.